

What Does the Bible Say about Being Gay?

--Probably not what you've been told.

Introduction

This work is the result of many years of Bible study and lecture presentations for Church groups, university students, and other friends I've been privileged to meet in the work of the parish priesthood.

It is for people who care deeply about the Bible and hope to hear God speaking through it. It is for people who have found the "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit" present in the lives of Christians heterosexual and homosexual, and find that reality hard to reconcile with what they've heard about the Bible as condemning gay and lesbian people.

Many other works have provided scholarship and insight on questions of history, anthropology, psychology, and biology. This work focuses on the Scriptures of the Christian Church. My sources are the Hebrew Bible, the Greek New Testament, and the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible held in high esteem by the early Church). I have used standard concordances of each work in the original language, with the Brown, Driver, and Briggs Lexicon for the Old Testament and the Liddell-Scott Lexicon for the Septuagint and New Testament.

Conclusions to which I have come over the years, from Bible research alone, have been confirmed for me by greater scholars on the general topic of homosexuality. But the affirmations I make concerning what the Bible says are the result of immersion in the texts themselves, in the ongoing dialogue of the community of faith enlivened by the Holy Spirit, listening to, questioning, and being questioned by the conversation of our ancestors with God.

The original and more detailed form of this study is available. At the urging of friends, this shortened and less technical summary is also offered. I aspire to follow (admittedly, a great distance behind) the example of the late Bishop John A.T. Robinson who provided not only the earth-shaking scholarly treatise *Redating the New Testament*, but also a tract, *Can We Trust the New Testament?* to which he referred as "*Redating without tears.*"

It is my purpose to share what I have learned about the four prooftexts from the Bible most often used against homosexual people; and to examine the requirements for a Jesus-defined understanding of marriage. Finally, given that there are and have been many different interpretations which take the Bible seriously, I will offer my own basis for risking a decision toward the interpretation which includes as equals all who wish to enter the Kingdom of God --regardless of their culture, sex, race, or sexual orientation.

2 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

I. What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah? (Genesis 18-19)

The story from which the term "sodomy" gets its name had nothing to do with sexual orientation. But a careful reading of the text reveals judgments relevant to our culture.

A. The text of the story

The story describes a minority "outsider" living in the wealthy and arrogant town of Sodom, taking in strangers for the night to protect them against the violence of the city. A lynch mob gathers at the door demanding to have the strangers handed over. When the householder refuses, they intend to do "even more violence" to him, but they are struck with a sudden confusing blindness. The guests instruct the householder to leave the city with any who are related to him. The householder's own sons-in-law are outside with the lynch mob, and they laugh at his warning. At sunrise, the family escapes the city which is then destroyed by fire from heaven.

Some read the mob's demand to "know" the strangers as an indication of sexual intent. To the extent that this is warranted by the text, it is speaking not of sexual orientation but of rape as the characteristic of the people of Sodom, of all the people, every last citizen -- even the sons-in-law of Lot, the detested stranger. The words of the citizens betray, far from sexual attraction, a hatred of outsiders. Rape is an expression not of sexual appetite but of domination and violence.

B. A parallel story

A parallel story in Judges 19-21 has the demanded victim handed over and raped to death. This victim is a woman. If the crime of Sodom for which all the citizens were destroyed was homosexuality, then the crime of Gibeah in this story, for which all the citizens are likewise destroyed, would be heterosexuality. But in both cases the nature of the crime is clear: cities of violence reject "the sojourners" among them and rather than protecting them, humiliate and torture them to death.

C. References elsewhere in the Bible

Sodom and Gomorrah receive a number of references in the Bible. Of these, most concern the legendary destruction of the "cities of the plain" as a warning of what will befall others. When a specific sin is cited as the cause, most references point to the arrogance of wealth. Ezekiel (16: 49) offers the most direct analysis of Sodom's guilt:

Look! this was the guilt of Sodom your sister:
Arrogance, surplus of bread, and undisturbed ease were for her and her daughters;
but the hand of the poor and needy she did not strengthen.

The Scriptures concerning the sin of Sodom never mention homosexuality. The crimes singled out are arrogance, wealth without concern for the poor, violence, cruelty to the defenseless, refusal to welcome strangers or rejection of the Lord's messengers, and

3 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

idolatry. In the Gospels, Jesus exclusively alludes to Sodom as an example of rejecting the messenger (inhospitality in ordinary times and a sign of doom at the end).

D. But what about sex?

Where sex is mentioned in relation to Sodom and Gomorrah, the sin is adultery, not homosexuality. In Ezekiel, "abominations" refer to idols and their props, and the practices of their worship, including prostitution. In 2 Peter 2: 10-14, the false leaders in the Church who are warned by the example of Sodom and other notorious sinners are characterized as having "abominable lusts, insulting angels, carousing..."(NEB) And verse 14 claims that these same sinners have "eyes for nothing but adulteresses"--using a word that can only be talking about women whom these men seek out for sexual gratification. Their kinship to Sodom is in exploitation of defenseless people, and arrogance, even if masked by religious authority.

In Jude 7, rendered in the RSV: "acted immorally and indulged in unnatural lust..." the Greek text is literally, "They resorted to prostitution and went after other (*heteras*) flesh." Here, it is believed that the people of Sodom knew their guests were angels, and lusted after flesh "other" than human. As Jude sees it, this is a crime of arrogance.

E. Conclusion

In conclusion, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah describes prejudice and violence akin to that of the Ku Klux Klan. The prophets and Writings, the Gospels and the Epistles point to violence, oppression, arrogance, inhospitality and rejection of the Lord's messengers as the sin of Sodom. Contemporary topics addressed by the story of Sodom and Gomorrah are racism (a modern version of hostility toward those different from the majority in town), indifference to the plight of the poor and homeless, and refusal to welcome immigrants to our cities.

Do we reject or heed the Lord's messengers who call us to account for these national sins? That is the question raised by the prophets and by Jesus when they speak of Sodom. Why would we insist, instead, on importing into the story an alien meaning, and singling out a minority in our own nation to persecute, with these texts as our warrant?

II. Does Levitical holiness exclude homosexuals?

"Holiness" in the Bible refers to the distinctiveness of the God of Israel, apart from all the other gods. Not everything divine (pertaining to gods) is holy, but only what shares in the nature of the God of Israel. Many oracles in the Bible begin, "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt"--this God and not another. Other gods support the "powers that be;" and tyrants rise after death into their pantheons. Only the God of Israel champions the lowly, casts down the mighty from their thrones, and lifts up the weak. The admonition to the Jewish people in these oracles, to "be holy," is equally expressed in the words, "Do not do what the people of the other nations do in serving their gods."

4 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

It is possible, as Jesus and Paul taught, to pick up peculiar admonitions from long ago, adhering to them perfectly, and completely to miss the point, not becoming holy at all. It is also possible in a different world from theirs that “the spirit of the law” allows or requires us to set aside the specifics of Exilic Judaism.

A. Getting to Leviticus

A thousand years in the making was the Hebrew Bible Jesus knew. Scholars generally agree about these periods in its formation: 1) The Kingdom of David and Solomon (the 10th Century BCE “Jahwist” tradition); 2) the division between Judah in the south and Israel in the north, and the northern “Elohists” interpretation; 3) collections of 8th century oracles of prophets by their students in Israel and Judah; 4) the fall of Israel to the Assyrian Empire in 721 BCE; 5) Josiah’s reform and Deuteronomist retellings of history, from 621 to the Babylonian conquest; 6) the fall of Judah in 587, and the Exile of its leading families to Babylon; 7) the return from Exile and priestly writings for restoration of Judah in 538 and after; 8) redefinitions shaped by the “Chroniclers” and editors of older collections in the years 500-300.

Two verses in Leviticus cited by some as condemning homosexuals stand in the fifth and sixth era listed above: around the time of the Babylonian subjection of Jewish culture, in what is known as the Holiness Code, within the Priestly reorganization of the Torah.

B. Two Verses in Leviticus

With a male you will not lie the lying-of-a woman:
That is abomination (*to'evah hu'*). (Lev. 18:22)

And a man who will lie with a male the lying-of-a-woman:
Abomination (*to'evah*) they do, both of them;
Dying they will die, both of them. (Lev. 20:13)

Is homosexuality in the 20th Century Church the same thing as “lying-of-a-woman” with a male prohibited for 6th or 5th Century BCE Jews surrounded by the gods of other nations? There are several clues. They include 1) the nature of various forms of decree in the Torah; 2) peculiarities of sexual prohibitions; 3) placement in the Holiness Code and the Priestly compilation; 4) wording of the text; 5) the word *to'evah* (“abomination”).

1. The Variety and Repetition of Torah Decrees

The lists in Leviticus are not the only compilations of decrees in the Torah or “the five books of Moses,” but are among the most detailed and repetitious lists. The verses that concern us here are a type of decree, usually associated uniquely with the religion of the Israelites, stated in the “apodictic” form: “You shall not...” (or in later forms, “you shall...”). Whether acted out in relation to other people or to God, they define a person's relation to Israel’s God. For example, apodictic lists of unclean animals, more detailed in

5 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

Leviticus than in Deuteronomy, may have reflected animals held sacred by cults known to Judah after the fall of Israel. The elaboration of these lists in the period of the Babylonian exile and afterwards, the reasons given (they are *to'evah*, abomination; or *tamma'*, unclean --not that they are injurious to health or low in essential nutrients) and the difficulty of reconciling these reasons with the creation theology arising at the same time --that God created everything good-- supports this conclusion. But the debate over clean and unclean foods continued into the New Testament era.

2. Apodictic decrees regarding sexual conduct

Adultery is seen consistently as a violation of covenant which reflects on our faithfulness to God as well as to one another. Though "social" in content, the jeopardy in which adultery places the community is *life without faith*, rather than just a threat to the maintenance of patriarchal propriety over inheritance.

The remaining sexual decrees are closely tied to cultic concerns. Prostitution was originally viewed as both adultery and as a cultic violation: the term *qedeshah* -- sacred prostitute-- is used throughout the Hebrew Bible interchangeably with the general word for prostitute, *zonah*. Jeremiah and Ezekiel use *zonah* almost exclusively to speak of idolatry, often involving ritual prostitution. If modern Christians oppose prostitution, our opposition is based not on Torah (where prostitutes are temple minions of other gods) but on a biblical concern for economic injustice which drives some to prostitution as a means of survival, or a creation-based refusal to make any person a commodity or object for others' gratification. Prostitution *as we know it* is not the ritual service of a fertility god, the reason for its prohibition in Deuteronomy and Leviticus and beyond.

Two prohibitions appear only in Leviticus and later. First, lying with a woman during her menstruation is forbidden as unclean. Secondly, lying the lying-of-a-woman with a male is forbidden. The first decree, against sexual intercourse during menstruation, though not appearing historically before the Holiness Code, is spelled out at considerable length in Leviticus 12, and appears repeatedly in Ezekiel, among other biblical writings, as a major concern for the people of God. It seems to have an ongoing profound ritual significance.

The second prohibition appears only in the Holiness Code. Nothing like this wording shows up again, before or after, in the Hebrew Bible. The only texts which could possibly be talking about the same thing are references to male sacred prostitutes (*qedeshim*) who appear around the time of the Deuteronomists; they were associated with Ba'al shrines in the hills of Judea and Samaria, with phallic-centered worship involving the sacred pillars and poles of Asherah.

3. The Holiness Code and the Priestly Writings

Prohibitions related to cult proliferated from the time of Josiah's reform, through the period of the Exile and the captives' return to Judah. Deuteronomistic decrees on foods, crops, and cultic sites are more detailed than anything that existed in the life of Israel

6 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

before them. The Holiness Code, a response to Babylon's domination, surpasses Deuteronomy. The Levitical restatement of the Holiness Code implements its way of life spelled out for a re-constructed society. Regulations regarding sacrifices at the Temple (read back into the Tabernacle of Moses' time), foods, sabbath and festivals, and inter-marriage carry a lot of weight, even overshadowing the Ten Words.

The Holiness Code is most complete in enumerating "unclean" and "abominable" offenses. Of two lists, the first in Leviticus 17-18, the second in Leviticus 20, the latter list repeats the former, adding penalties for the prohibitions.

The first Holiness list has a long enumeration of offenses against service to the Lord: offenses which in some way involve service to other gods. The first few are explicit sacrifices to some entity other than the LORD. Then comes a detailed breakdown of the meaning of "uncovering the nakedness of one's own flesh", built around the prohibition of lying with one's father's wife, and with one's sister. Why are these concerns designated so specifically, as they all involve adultery, which is already prohibited? Incest is not the concern either, for nowhere is it stated that a man shall not lie with his own daughter or son. That should be the first prohibition, on which the second gradation, "a woman and her daughter," would be based --if incest were the underlying concern.

But if we consider the pantheons of ancient Egypt, Canaan, and Mesopotamia, the reason for the prohibitions in the Holiness Code, apart from adultery and incest, is obvious enough. Divine dynasties were maintained in the heavens and in their corresponding earthly palaces, by just such unions. Tyrants assumed the sexual rights of the patriarch over all the females brought into the household: the behavior of their gods affirmed this right. So rather than simply denouncing incest, the Law and Prophets denounce Israelite men who resort to both a woman and her daughter, or sons and fathers who resort to the same woman --in the context of serving other gods at their shrines.

When Christians oppose "uncovering one's flesh" in the specific ways listed in Leviticus, it is not because this is how foreign tyrants emulate the sexual hegemony of their deities. We do not encounter cults based on such practices. There are, however, biblical guidelines against adultery in any age, and against exploitation of the weak by the strong. *In other words, to see whether a specific guideline associated with cults still holds for us, we look for the same prohibition in other places in Scripture, with non-cultic reasoning.*

The lying-of-a-woman with a male appears only here, except for the specific prohibition of male temple prostitution in Deuteronomy and in the Deuteronomistic History. Given the reasoning of the other prohibitions with which it is grouped, it is likely that *mishkevei ' ishshah* refers to the cultic prostitution known to the audience of the Holiness Code as having infiltrated Israel and Judah before the Exile, and as typical of the worship of idols.

4. The Wording of the Prohibition

And with a male you (masculine singular) will not lie the lying-of-a-woman: that is *to' evah*

7 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

And a man who will lie with a male the lying-of-a-woman,
they both do *to' evah* dying they will die, their blood is upon them.

What about women lying with women? Should we assume that this is a corresponding wrong for women? The woman's corresponding sin is not just assumed in the nearby similar and more deeply rooted prohibition of lying with a beast.

And with any beast you (masculine) will not give to-lie-yourself, to make unclean with it; and a woman will not stand before a beast to stretch-out; that is *tevel*.

And a man who gives to-lie-himself with a beast, dying shall die, and the beast you shall slay. And a woman who approaches to any beast to stretch-out with it: also you will slay her, the woman, and the beast; dying they will die, their blood is upon them.

Where this section of Torah wants to include women in a command, it can do so. But *it does not do so* in the prohibition that some read as anti-homosexual. Men are prohibited from a particular lying with males. If homosexuality in general were the concern, there would be a parallel word about women lying with women. But there is not.

Further, in a list of synonyms for sexual activity (approach, uncover the nakedness of, lie with, stretch-out), this decree does not repeat a normal phrase--e.g., "you shall not lie with...." Rather, we find a unique phrase: "the lying-of-a-woman." The sin is for a man to lie the lying-of-a-woman; that is *to'evah*. Specifically, it is a cultic violation for the man to act as if he were a woman in intercourse. "To play the part of a woman" in such a scene is to be the receiving partner in anal intercourse. Even in the later and sexually promiscuous societies of Rome and Greece, this was a role for social inferiors, for male prostitutes or slaves. The second list adds that the male who plays the "man's" role in this intercourse also commits *to'evah*, and they both shall die. Especially in light of the contextual clues considered above, the specific wording of this decree indicates the activity of a male prostitute (and his male client), intentionally turning from the God of Israel so as to participate in the service of another cult, or *to'evah*.

5. Evolution of the Noun *to'evah*

The Hebrew verb *ta'av* shows up in literature from several centuries as a general word expressing disgust. "Even my best friends loathe me," the lament goes. But as a noun, *to'evah*, the "abomination" has a peculiar nature --and all the more certainly when it appears in the century or so around the Exile. Where the noun is used most, it is directly connected to the cults of foreign gods. This just happens to be the era in which our two verses in Leviticus appear. At this time, the noun *to'evah* could be read as a code-word meaning "service of other gods." The references to *to'evoth* (plural) as cultic shrines, paraphernalia and practitioners in 1Kings 14:24 and 2Kings 23:13 also mention the presence of male sacred prostitutes, *qedeshim*.

C. Conclusion

Given the literary and theological context, the historical and cultural context, the grammar of the text, and a definitive word in this double text of the Holiness Code: the evidence, I believe, makes it ignorance at best to say that the Hebrew Bible condemns homosexuals as abominable to the Lord. It may be accurate for some contemporary Christians to say, "I find homosexuals disgusting," but they do not properly reflect this text in their statement. All we can say in relation to this decree is that any form of worship which involves male prostitution in the service of the divinity is incompatible with the holiness of Israel's God.

Lest we dismiss the double list of Leviticus 17-18 and 20 as too obvious, or irrelevant to our time, sexual excesses have been justified by cult leaders in recent times --claiming to be true heirs to the ancient Israelites. For such as these, a literal reading of the Holiness Code's cultic-sexual prohibitions would be appropriate.

III. PURITY AND FAITH IN ROMANS 1: 18-32

For Christian readers of Scripture, the most likely reference to "homosexual activity" is found in the beginning of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans.

A. The Point of the Epistle

Paul writes the Roman community of Jewish and Gentile Christians, about God's plan to become known and to redeem the whole cosmos. These two groups have been brought together, *ultimately for the reconciliation of all in Christ, for "the manifestation of the children of God."* Their accepting each other as equals is more than a passing wonder; it is a signal event in establishing God's justice for the whole creation.

Paul argues in Romans 1-2 that all have sinned, Jews and Gentiles alike. We are equal before God in our sin, as we are made equals in grace. Paul begins, in claiming that all fall short of God's justice, by describing pagan society as a reflection of its religion. First, he says, the Gentiles have not been left in the dark about God. Yet they have, "by their injustice, suppressed the truth." They do not give honor or thanks to God; they exchange the immortal God for images representing their own lusts. Like the nations against which Israel was warned of old, they turn to gods of fertility, wealth, and power.

Secondly, as pagans have chosen to worship their own cravings rather than giving thanks to the God who might have been known, God gives them up to degrading passions in their worship. Their corrupt worship leads to lives and societies full of corruption. The idol-worshippers become more brute-like than the animals to whose images they bow. But to counter any self-congratulation, Paul goes on to address the god-fearers:

2:1 Therefore you are without apology, whoever you are who judge. In the matter in which you judge the other, you condemn yourself, for you the judge do

9 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

the same....

This verse leads into the claim that Jews are as much in need of God's grace as Gentiles -- and then to the celebration of God's grace offered to all in Christ Jesus.

B. What Does It Say?

The assumption that Paul condemns homosexuals in Romans 1 makes it hard to see anything other than lesbian and gay people in verses 26-27. But if one starts with an open mind to what Paul himself says, then there are new things to notice.

1. Women and Men

Their women exchanged the natural use for the beside/beyond-nature; likewise even the men, after leaving the natural use of women, burned with lust for each other, males with males perpetrating impropriety....

As in Leviticus, men and women are judged; but in specific behavior that some call homosexual, only men are described. Leviticus mentions men lying "the lying-of-a-woman" with men but not women lying with women. Paul describes sexual intercourse among men. What the women do is "exchange their natural use for that beside nature."

2. Exchanging

Paul uses the word *allassein* to indicate that pagans have "exchanged God's glory for an image." But here, he uses the word *met-allassein*. Where *allassein* is used of all kinds of exchanging, *met-allassein* often refers to death in the sense that we say someone "passed" or "crossed over." Verse 26 might best be read, "their women passed beyond their natural use." They went beyond their normal sexual activity for something else. Paul, influenced by the Hebrew Bible, describes "their women" in cult-related adultery and prostitution.

3. Beside Nature

The term *para physin* is often rendered "against nature." But the preposition *para* --as in our word "parallel"-- describes running alongside, or beyond. It is not that women changed their sexual orientation to the opposite orientation. Rather, they were engaging in sexual practices along with or beyond what they would "naturally" have done.

Just what is the "nature" which the women of the pagan cults have passed beyond? As Paul uses the word *physis*, he refers to *what is customary to the subject* whose "nature" is being discussed. Nature includes inherited religious understanding as well as habits and self-selected practices. Where modern Westerners think of "natural" versus "unnatural," Paul thinks of "one's nature" and "another's nature:" these are not necessarily in opposition; they're just alongside each other. In the famous analogy of the natural and grafted branches on the olive tree in Romans 11 (of Jews and Gentiles in Christ), the wild branch is grafted onto the good tree, not "against nature" as some read, but *para physin*--

beyond nature. What is *para physin* is not immoral in itself. It is God who does what is *para physin* by cutting and grafting tree branches.

The women of the Gentiles, in worshipping idols, pass over their customary sexual use for something besides their custom or nature. They make themselves unclean and dishonor their bodies and the bodies of those to whom their use belongs, that is, their husbands. Verse 26, considered on its own terms, evokes a picture of the fertility cults so often described in the Torah, and in the Eighth through Sixth Century prophets. Daughters are sold to temple prostitution, and married women serve their time. Men and their sons lie with the same woman under sacred trees and at hilltop shrines.

4. Abandoning

Likewise, also, the men, after leaving the customary use of the women, ignited in their lust towards each other....

This does not describe men who have always been attracted to men. What they feel for each other now is not affection, but raging lust, *orexis*. Paul describes not a different sexual orientation, but a departure from the custom of these men. Their “natural” use is of their wives, the women of verse 26. In the service of corrupt gods, they have set “their” women to uses besides their custom; having exploited that situation, they move even further from customary use of their women by turning their lusts toward each other.

Popular prejudice is so ingrained that it bears repeating: This is not about men whose customary attraction is to other men. *It describes men whose customary attraction is to women.* They have exploitively indulged their heterosexual appetites, gone beyond their customary desires, and added to their demands a craving for men. *They are heterosexual men demanding homosexual encounter --and all in the context of worship.*

5. The Corresponding Reward

...men with (or against: *en*) men the unseemly (*aschemosynen*) perpetrating, and the recompense (*antimisthian*) which ought to be (*en edei*), for their wandering (*planes*), in themselves receiving.

Paul describes anal intercourse. The “unseemly” is indicated by the word he uses elsewhere for “private parts.” *Antimisthian* is a payback, in the irony with which we say, “turnabout is fair play.” Rather than the common word for doing anything (*ergazomai*), Paul chooses the word *kat-ergazomai*: to dominate, prevail upon, or even kill. The lust with which these men were enkindled had more than a touch of hostility in it. The description could be rendered: “Men into men their private parts shoving.”

What is the payback? Paul says, “They receive it in themselves.” The orgies to which they turn after satiating their “natural use” of women are nothing better than rape, and they fall to the same humiliation they have inflicted. To play the woman's part in the cults of other gods is *to'evah*; it happens to professionals and clients in the cults of the nations.

C. Allusions to Cultic Activity from the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha

Biblical denunciations of foreign gods and their rituals often include descriptions of cultic sexual activity. Paul rephrases, with his own logical flourish, a standard complaint from the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, quoting some texts directly.

The striking phrase “they exchanged the glory of God” appears three times in the Hebrew Bible, in Hosea 4: 1-14, Jeremiah 2: 5-10, Psalm 106: 19-41. As all these passages concern idolatry, they have other things in common. All mention sexual activity as part of the ritual in serving the other gods. All describe violent society resulting from worship of degrading gods. Paul alludes to these passages in describing the pagans. Like them, when he offers details of sexual activity, they describe cultic practice.

In Ezekiel 8-9, the Glory of the Lord departs the Temple because of the idols there, and the practices of worshippers in serving them. Abominations include idols (of “Passion,” of reptiles, beasts, and creeping things, of the fertility god Tammuz), and cultic actions of worshippers: passion aroused by the image, incense to animal idols, women wailing for Tammuz, men prostrating themselves to the sun. Because of “the abominations which they do here,” the Lord says, “they have filled the land with violence.” The logic and language are the same as Paul’s: 1) knowledge of God is rejected; 2) images are worshipped (involving fertility cults); 3) this worship leads to violence in society.

The Wisdom of Solomon is available to us in the Greek Septuagint, though Paul may have known it in Hebrew. A passage which underlies Romans 1 finds the nations without excuse, because reason should have convinced them that their idols are no gods. The text elaborates on the folly of those who “passed Wisdom by” as she entered the world offering the truth of God to all. Chapter 14 describes the relationship of degrading worship practices to degenerate society among the pagans.

22 Then it was not sufficient that they wander concerning the knowledge of God, but rather, they live by ignorance in a great war, which evil they greet as peace. 23 For in observing ritual child-killing or secret initiations or frenzied revelries of bizarre rites, 24 neither lives nor marriages do they keep clean, one against the other lying in wait to destroy, or grieving by illegitimate birth.

25 And all is intermixed: blood and murder, theft and baiting, corruption, faithlessness, tumult, perjury, 26 uproar over good, forgetfulness of grace, defilement of souls, perversity of origins [or of generations], disorder of marriages, adultery and licentiousness.

27 For the religion of nameless idols is the beginning of all evil, and its source and end. 28 For they either indulge in frenzy or they prophesy lies or live unjustly or quickly perjure themselves, 29 because they trusted in lifeless idols, swearing wrongly and not expecting to be done harm.

Verses 23 and 24 clarify: the central acts in the worship of idols are human sacrifice and ritualized prostitution. Since these enshrine murder and adultery, bloodshed and sexual

promiscuity typify the societies of the pagans. In a progression similar to Paul's, the sex-cult is described ("frenzied revelries" which defile marriage and lead to illegitimate births), leading to a list of evils typical of the society which worships in this way.

D. But Isn't Paul Talking About Homosexuals?

Given the Greek wording in Romans 1: 26-27, the place of this chapter in Paul's epistle, and the pattern of recognizable sources in the Septuagint, it is hard to see how we could make of these two verses a condemnation of gay or lesbian couples in the Church. Some still do, of course. But Paul follows a very logical sequence in Romans 1: 18-32.

- 1) Verses 18-21: The nations reject the knowledge of God available to them.
- 2) Verses 22-23: They exchange God's glory for idols which they construct.
- 3) Verses 24-27: Their worship of idols leads to corrupting worship practices.
- 4) Verses 28-32: Their degrading worship leads to a degraded society.

1. A Comprehensive Discussion of Homosexuals?

Some contend that Romans 1:18-32 is all about homosexuals: that verses 26 and 27 identify the subjects as lesbian women and gay men; verses 18-25 show how they got to be that way. And verses 28-32 describe the general character of homosexual people. This reasoning affirms those who believe that God condemns homosexuals, though it does violence to Paul's epistle. Instead of a masterful building in the first three chapters of Romans, to the grand theme of salvation in Jesus Christ, we are left with

- 1) a sermon against homosexuals,
- 2) a criticism of the Jews, and
- 3) an appeal to justification in Christ.

2. A Parenthetical Discussion of Homosexuals?

Perhaps Paul is about a larger purpose in Romans 1: 18-32, building a case that Gentiles need the grace of God in Christ. Only, as some maintain, verses 26 and 27 are about homosexuality in general. This understanding of Paul's logic reminds me of a sermon on the text, "Adam, where art thou?" The sermon had three points, which were

- 1) Everybody's got to be somewhere.
- 2) Some people are where they hadn't ought to be.
- 3) Now for a few words about infant baptism.

How much more laughable is the Adam sermon than this proposal for Paul's logic?

- 1) The nations have rejected the knowledge of God.
- 2) They have exchanged the glory of God for idols.
- 3) Now for a few words about homosexuals.
- 4) The nations who worship idols become violent and hostile.

13 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

Some hold the “few words about homosexuals” to begin the list of sins of the pagan cultures. But where does Paul ever begin a list of one-word categories of sin, with two verses about a particular sexual sin? When he spends more than a word or two on a specific sexual misconduct, it is in a pastoral directive addressing an actual situation in a congregation. Paul does not seem to think of sex first when discussing sin. To give a particular sexual behavior priority in all the evils of pagan society --and to give it vastly more attention than any other sins-- is totally out of character. Pagan worship is wrong because it is idolatry; it enshrines adultery, prostitution, and murder. As his forebears did, Paul describes idolatry as leading to injustice in society.

E. Conclusion

Paul’s sources describe pagan worship as leading to unjust societies; they depict disordered sexuality in the context of cultic rites. In the logical sequence of Romans 1: 26-27, Paul describes cultic practices (involving sexual “frenzies” as in Wisdom 14), before following them into the general conduct of pagan societies (verses 28-32). The women have passed from their customary sexual behavior to other use along with or besides their custom; the men have abandoned customary use of their women, ignited with hostile lust for each other --in the context of cultic shrines. In no case are people described whose customary (“natural”) attraction is to a partner of the same sex.

Verses 26 and 27 describe practices known to Paul as cultic rituals in the service of pagan gods. The people described in these verses are not homosexuals but are married heterosexuals who participate in orgiastic rites to their own degradation. This conclusion does justice to the wording of the Greek text, to Paul’s appreciation of the Hebrew Bible and the Apocrypha, and to the larger themes of the Epistle to the Romans. Paul’s purpose is not to exclude any class of sinners from the Church, but to show that there are no relevant classes into which we may divide those who turn to Christ Jesus as Lord.

IV. SODOMITES, CATAMITES, PERVERTS, HOMOSEXUALS

English Bibles render Hebrew and Greek words in different ways. With obscure words, translators may go with what they're accustomed to hearing. A translation which reinforces prejudice can affect the Church's health. If the prejudice concerns a despised minority, the effect can be as chilling as the scene around Lot's house in Sodom. Such is the case of two Greek words sometimes used against gay and lesbian people.

A. “The Soft”

The word *malakoi*, plural of *malakos*, appears only once in the New Testament as something sinful, though it is commonly used without any moral connotation. In I Corinthians 5-6, Paul is concerned with the distinction between the Church and the world. He opposes purity of the body (and of the whole Body of Christ) to prostitution, and restraint of the appetites to greed. Pagans may serve numerous gods with their bodies, or simply be ruled by their own appetites. But the norm for Christians is, "You

14 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

are not your own; therefore glorify God with your body." The Church must guard against pagan and self-serving lifestyles among its members, having nothing to do with so-called Christians who are lascivious and grasping. In I Corinthians 6: 9-10, Paul lists some of the unjust who are outside the Church, including:

<i>pornoi</i>	promiscuous men or "whoremongers"
<i>eidololatrai</i>	idol-servers
<i>moichoi</i>	adulterers
<i>malakoi</i>	the soft
<i>arsenokoitai</i>	male-beds
<i>kleptai</i>	thieves
<i>pleonektai</i>	graspers, over-reachers
<i>methusoi</i>	drunkards
<i>loidoroi</i>	cursers
<i>harpages</i>	rapists, plunderers.

Arsenokoitai appears in another list and will be considered shortly. *Malakoi* appears only here. The New English Bible puts these terms together, "homosexual perverts." Other translations read, "catamites and sodomites," presumably "passive" and "active" partners in male homosexual intercourse. Some take *malakoi* as "effeminate"--an unhelpful choice, because the term has so many meanings to contemporary English speakers, not to mention the fact that its underlying assumptions are derogatory to women.

Who are the *malakoi*? In common Greek usage, the meaning of the term is simply "soft." Jesus asks the followers of John the Baptist what they had expected of the fiery preacher, saying, "Behold, those who wear soft garments live in kings' houses." Metaphorically, "soft" in Greek can refer to self-indulgence or moral weakness, cowardice. In this list, it might indicate people who will not restrain their appetites; they will not discipline themselves for a higher purpose than their immediate gratification. Or they are too cowardly to make the difficult choices required of the Christian way of life. Either understanding is consistent with New Testament and common Greek uses of the word, as well as the direction of Paul's discussion in I Corinthians.

To make the word refer to homosexual intercourse is about as reliable as to render Jesus' retort in Matthew 11:8, "Behold, the transvestites live in kings' houses." Early Christian commentators did not associate *malakos* or *malakia* with homosexuality; a standard translation in this list was "masturbators." If Christian commentators typically associate this softness with sexual sin, despite the possibilities afforded by Greek use of the term elsewhere, perhaps they say more about their Church's concerns than about the text.

B. Male-Beds

The word following *malakoi* in the I Corinthians list appears only twice in the New Testament, and apparently never before Paul's use of it, in Greek literature. It hardly appears anywhere, except in New Testament commentaries on these two passages.

1. The Context

I Timothy 1: 9-10 has a more systematic list of the ungodly, corresponding with the Ten Commandments. When early Christians looked for a summary of “the law,” what immediately came to mind was the Ten Words. See, for example, Luke 18-- “You know the commandments....” and Romans 13-- “the whole law...and whatever commandments there may be....” “We know,” the writer says here, “that the law is good, provided anyone uses it rightly, knowing that for the just the law is not put forth, but rather for

<i>anomois kai anupotaktois,</i>	lawless and unsubmitive
<i>asebesi kai hamartolois,</i>	impious and sinners
<i>anosiois kai bebelois,</i>	unholy and profane...”

The first three groups of sinners correspond roughly with “the first tablet” of the Ten Words. As in most such summary lists in the New Testament, however, the “second tablet” is matched with more precision.

<i>...patroloais kai metroloais,</i>	father-killers and mother-killers (Honor father and mother)
<i>androphonois</i>	homicides (Do not kill)
<i>pornois arsenokoitais</i>	whoremongers male-beds (Do not commit adultery)
<i>andrapodistais</i>	kidnappers/slave-traders (Do not steal)
<i>psevstais epiorkois</i>	liars perjurers (Do not bear false witness).”

In the mind of the writer, *pornoi* and *arsenokoitai* stand as equals in adultery, just as liars and perjurers are equals in false witness. The most consistent use of the word *pornos* in Greek is for a man who resorts to prostitutes, or is sexually promiscuous. As in the Hebrew Bible, however, prostitution --the *porn-* family of words in the New Testament-- is so often associated with idolatry (and with adultery, also linked to spiritual faithlessness) that the two become almost synonymous. But who are the *arsenokoitai* who commit adultery, along with the *pornoi*?

2. What Grammar Can Tell Us

The first assumption to abandon, as some commentators believe the word describes male homosexuals, is that the male-beds are men. Some New Testament lexicons list the *arsenokoitai* in a presumed masculine singular form, but this is speculation.

In the Greek language, nouns of various declensions have different endings, depending on number, gender, and case (function in the sentence). First Declension feminine nouns have the same plural endings in the nominative and dative cases as First Declension masculine plural nouns in those two cases. It happens that our two lists use the root word *he koite* (literally “the bed” or slang “the whore”) only in the plural nominative and

dative forms --which would coincide with an otherwise unknown masculine plural nominative and dative of the hypothetical *ho koites*. So we are left either to assume that the noun is, as usual, feminine, or to posit that in this unique instance it has been changed into a masculine grammatical form: a case of trans-gendered linguistics.

This ignores the fact that in Greek, "the bed" as a concrete object and as slang for a prostitute or very promiscuous person, is feminine: *he koite*. Our mystery word in these two lists matches the spelling we would expect for the female prostitute or promiscuous woman --the one who makes herself available to any man who comes along.

The question here is whether we have a male who beds people, or a person who beds males. While either is theoretically possible, this compound noun is similar to another, *arrenotokos* (*arreno-* being a variant of *arseno-*) which is not a "male bearer of children" but a (female) "bearer of male children." With *arsenokoite*, I believe Paul coined a graphic term to describe a woman who makes herself a bed for males. She might not be a professional prostitute, but she is promiscuous.

For the moment, let's hypothesize that the *arsenokoitai* are men. Then the use of this grammatically feminine word --which is ordinarily used in slang of women-- to describe the men, would tell us one of two things. 1) Paul is insulting the men because he believes they have neutered themselves or are "playing the part of a woman;" they are promiscuous or professional "recipients" of anal intercourse. 2) Or, if Paul is not insulting them, they nonetheless occupy such an institutionalized role in society that only this feminine word describes them. When *he koite* is used of a woman it signifies that she is a prostitute or whore. The same would be true if the word were used for a man.

3. Another Use of the Word

A use of this word is documented on the base of a statue of the Byzantine Emperor Basil I (9th Century C.E.) at the Eastern Gate of Thessalonica. According to the inscription, due to Basil's success in fighting off "insolent Babylon," those who enter the city need not fear barbarians or *arrenas arrenokoitas*. (*Arren* is a variant for *arsen*, the form for "male" in the New Testament.) It is specified that the male-beds one need not fear are themselves males. The two words are in apposition, in the same case: both accusative plural. (The accusative is the same form for both masculine and feminine plural nouns in this declension.) Without the qualifier, *male* male-beds, the inscribers did not assume that people would know they were talking about men.

4. So Who Are the Arsenokoitai?

Neither contemporary Greeks, nor Greek-speaking writers for centuries after the New Testament, seem to have associated this word with "homosexuals."

The list in I Timothy 1 contains a double allusion to those who commit adultery. The grammar indicates, and the context easily supports, that these offenders are 1) sexually promiscuous men (*pornoi*) and 2) sexually promiscuous women (*arsenokoitai*)--people who violate marriage vows as a way of life.

If we make the text speak only of men, then they are 1) men who are promiscuous or who resort to (female) prostitutes --*pornoi*-- and 2) men who resort, perhaps sadistically, to male prostitutes, or who choose to be prostitutes or promiscuous themselves, whether with men or with women --*arsenokoitai*. Insisting that *arseno-* in this compound word describes the *koitai* ("beds" who are male), does not disclose for whom the men are "beds." They could be promiscuous with women or men or both, but the sin manifest in their behavior is promiscuity, not sexual orientation.

In any case, the sin is not sexual intercourse of a committed couple who are faithful to each other. It is exploitative, predatory sexual self-gratification, violating marriage vows.

V. THE MEANING OF MARRIAGE: THE TWO BECOME ONE

To summarize the examination of popular anti-homosexual prooftexts:

1) The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not about sexuality, as confirmed in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament.

2) Two parallel verses in Leviticus on lying "the lying-of-a-woman with a man" describe ancient cultic practices. Context, unique wording, and description as *to' evah* show that this is not a prohibition against homosexuals in general.

3) Paul's case in Romans for equality of Jews and Gentiles in the Church does not condemn homosexuals. Rather, Paul gives a standard Jewish description of pagan cultic activities. Romans 1: 26-27 refers to heterosexual worshippers who commit adultery in these rites.

4) The rare Greek word in two Epistles, translated by some as "homosexuals," does not fit that rendering. Grammar, context, the scant extra-biblical evidence, and early Christian tradition stand in the way of using it to condemn gay men or women.

Given viable alternatives to anti-homosexual interpretation, we are left with a new question. Can the Church bless same-sex marriages as it has blessed heterosexual marriages?

A. Argument from Custom ("Nature")

Lacking prohibitions in Scripture, some hold that the Bible condemns homosexuals who live as committed spouses, turning to argument from silence. "Where in the Bible do you find such a marriage?" they ask. Since there are no obvious examples, they maintain a divinely ordained natural form of marriage in which the prerequisite is a heterosexual couple.

Scripture silence purportedly tells about Nature, that homosexuality is "unnatural" and therefore evil. The criterion for faith is found not in ongoing conversation with Scripture

itself, but rather in a construct (Nature) through which the Bible is mediated. This approach to Scripture often arises when social change threatens customs. The customs themselves become an item of faith; *open-minded dialogue with the Scriptures* is replaced by *heated talk about the Scriptures* as the source of the threatened social norms.

Within recent Church history, great injustice has prevailed while slavery, hierarchical marriage, the rule of kings, and the absolute rights of owners of resources to profit have been held as natural and biblical. The criterion for discernment in these examples is not in the Bible or the experience of the faithful in community with each other; it is "Nature" constructed to protect a threatened social institution. Something has come between biblical text and faithful living, eliminating the possibility of social change and threatening disaster to those who might consider a new interpretation.

The wedge between Scripture and believer at this point is precisely what St. Paul meant in his use of the word "nature" (*physis*): *what is customary to the person or community* facing this decision. Because he was daringly honest in understanding "nature," the Apostle was also clear that nature is not good in and of itself: our human institutions and customs are relative, changeable, and always under judgment by God. It is God who acts "beyond nature" (*para physin*) grafting wild branches onto olive trees and abolishing the customary distinctions we make between sexes, ethnic groups, social classes, "clean and unclean." The Epistle to the Galatians is the most focused writing Paul left on this issue. While claiming to be "a Jew by nature," he proclaims his faith: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision amounts to anything; all that matters is a new creation!"

St. Paul could not have anticipated all the social institutions and conventions that might emerge through history, to be sanctioned as ordained nature, only to be reconsidered and set aside for a new "nature." But the witness of this history is on Paul's side: what we consider "natural" in human society is passing away; God continually calls us in Christ Jesus to a new creation. The Church has sometimes lagged behind this vision.

B. "Natural" Requirements of a Christian Marriage

In recent years, the Church has struggled to acknowledge diverse biblical interpretations, affirm the presence of gay Christians, *and still exclude them enough to satisfy those who reject them*. How are people eligible for Baptism, sharing the Eucharist, Confirmation, Reconciliation, and Unction; but barred by God forever from Holy Matrimony and Ordination? It might seem that we want gay people to tithe, to bring others into the Church, to serve through the ministries of the Church, to offer their talents to building up the Church --while maintaining power over them by denying them the stability of permanent households and refusing to acknowledge their gifts as given by God to the whole Church.

If the old prooftexts are inadequate to this dilemma, those who are threatened by social change fall back on "what the Bible says" about sex in general, to exclude gay people. They extract from biblical evidence a "natural law" prescribing just the form of married sex customary to them. Viewing Scripture as the enforcer of social order rather than the living and challenging Word of God, they fail to see the relativity of our social

conventions.

In relation to marriage, a number of requirements have been accepted as if specified in Scripture, and the only form allowed by Nature. These include that people should marry for love, in monogamous, consensual relationships, for procreation (a more contested idea). Yet in biblical descriptions of marriage, there is little to warrant "love," monogamy, consent, or the possibility of procreation as requirements for a valid marriage. Rather, the Bible presents a relativistic view of marriage as a human institution through which --in many different forms and for different motives-- God can work in the lives of the faithful.

C. Towards a New Testament Understanding of Marriage

In showing how culturally conditioned our conventional wisdom may be, I have hoped to clear the way for a fresh look at what the texts actually hold for us in understanding marriage. Much that is unquestionable in certain Christian circles regarding marriage is without biblical foundation. But there are consistent themes which can enlighten us on the meaning of marriage, if we wish to approach it as a sacrament in the Body of Christ.

1. The Hebrew Biblical Sources

Jesus and his immediate followers interpreted the relevant texts in Hebrew Scripture, specifically the two accounts of creation (Genesis 1 and 2) and the Ten Commandments.

a) A "Yahwist" (Tenth-Century) Story

Scripture begins with two accounts of how humans came to populate the earth. The earlier account, beginning in Genesis 2:4b, is a human-centered, earth-based story. An *adham* or "earth creature" is formed from the *admah*, the earth. Plants and animals, rivers and regions of earth are created for and presented to the *adham*. The Lord struggles through a dilemma: How to find companionship for the *adham* once it has been created. After several unsuccessful (though not unproductive) attempts, at last the Lord realizes that suitable companionship for the *adham* will come from no other source than from the *adham* itself.

The *adham* is put to sleep, the Lord takes from it to build a similar creature, and on its waking, we find two characters, ' *ish* and ' *ishshah* (man and woman). The word-play is not the point of the story, of course, but a touch of humor from a storyteller who loved to play with language. Intense joy and fulfillment come to the *adham* who could not be truly happy as the only one of its kind, no matter how many wonderful companions were brought to it.

Some have read this account as indicating that marriage is a requirement, that every man must have a woman and vice versa. The Church, however, has stood against culture's belief that men and women are created for sexual union. Genesis 2 indicates rather that human beings are not solitary; we must live in community to be fulfilled. This is the

basis for the existence of marriage, but not a command that all shall be married (or that all shall have sexual relations with a person of the other sex). The need for community, and the formation of humans out of the same material, explains the fervent desire of a man for his woman --so strong that he will even leave his family for her.

In its patriarchal context, the story shows the woman to be equal to the man: She is the climax of God's creative efforts, the resolution of the Lord's dilemma, the fulfillment of the man's longing, and the occasion of pure joy. But the story is not about the relative position of woman and man in society. It answers the question, "How is it that we are here?" Secondly, it emphasizes that for true companionship, *adham* the Lord's earth creature requires another of the same flesh and bone, of one flesh. The purpose of marriage as a derived human activity is fulfillment and joy. *The prerequisite for their partnership is not that they be male and female, but rather that they be of the same flesh and bone --i.e., both human.* No other creatures fulfill that need. Sex and marriage manifest the Lord's gift to humankind in creation: life and companionship.

b) A "Priestly" (Exilic or later) Account

The later version of Creation is grander in design, and more focussed on human dignity, than the first one. God is not on earth but above and beyond the heavens. Human beings are not earth-creatures for whom God had to seek suitable companionship among the animals. Rather, they are the apex of Creation, to which everything else leads, the image and likeness of God, set to rule over all the creatures of the earth.

Despite the difference in perspective, the question is the same, "How is it that we are here?" "Here" is a regulated world of seasons and festivals, teeming with many forms of life always reproducing. This reality is to be viewed not with suspicion or fear as a playing out of some cosmic struggle between life and death, or as representing competing powers in the universe, but rather as all from the purpose of God, all good in design and intent, and all subject to God and secondarily to humankind. That is how we happen to be here, seeing the things we see and doing the things we do.

An anti-pagan theme, needed in the Exile and thereafter, resounds throughout, but perhaps chiefly in the designation of the *adham* (both male and female) as the image of God, ruling over all the creatures (the opposite of serving --i.e., worshipping-- them). Sexuality, far from being the essence of human life which the fertility cults would make it, is simply the way we happen to reproduce. There is no cosmic or mystical significance in the fact of male and female persons: they are equally and together *adham*, the image and likeness of God. Their purpose is to satisfy God by reflecting that image and likeness, populating the earth, and ruling it well.

Some have read this account as an anti-contraceptive command, as if the purpose were to ensure a high rate of reproduction. Others have read it as anti-ecological, as if humans were required by God to plunder ("subdue") the earth and exterminate its creatures. We could better insist that, since God set the lights of the heavens to serve as signs for seasons and festivals, all the faithful are obliged to keep the Jewish festivals as they were defined after the Exile. Not to observe them would be to defy God's purpose in Nature,

setting signs for marking of seasons!

In the story as told, neither marriage nor sexuality is the point. These are givens in human society, neither commanded nor regulated in Creation. The created gift of God is our life as sentient creatures and our dignity as bearers of God's image. What is commanded is that we give respect and honor not to any other creature, nor even to any humans as the highest authority (since we all share equally in the image of God), but rather to God alone, the only God and Creator, the God not just of Israel but of all the heavens and earth. All our ruling, enjoying, producing, and reproducing must be sustained under that rule.

2. Jesus' Use of the Hebrew Sources

A fresh reading of the Creation accounts from Genesis shows that prescribing a form for marriage is not the purpose of either text. To the extent that they speak of marriage, the following is said:

--*From Genesis 2*: 1) Marriage is a human manifestation of God's provision that we lead lives in community rather than as solitary creatures. 2) The criterion for community and therefore for our marriages is that we be of the same flesh and bone, equally human. 3) The purpose of our community and of our marriages is companionship, fulfillment, and joy. In marriage, the sexual union is an experience of joy and fulfillment as being two-made-one.

--*From Genesis 1*: 4) Human beings enjoy a special dignity in creation as the image and likeness of God --a dignity shared equally by all humankind, by males and females. 5) Human activity, including sexual activity, must never be subject to the rule of other creatures, cosmic principles or mysteries (like those of the fertility cults or the Babylonian astrologers) or of other humans, however godlike (or, as we might say, "natural") their claims may seem. Humans must act in freedom as befits their dignity, subject only to God.

In order to test these claims, we are fortunate to have parallel Gospel accounts in which Jesus alludes to the Creation accounts when asked about marriage. The context is a question put to him about divorce.

The scene in Matthew 19 and Mark 10 reflects a documented difference in early rabbinical teaching on divorce, interpreting Deuteronomy 24: 1-4. The question is not whether divorce is permitted, but how broadly the Law permitting divorce might be interpreted. "For any reason" striking the man's fancy? Is the security of the woman subject to the man's whims altogether, or are there checks on his license to send her away?

Jesus rewrites the question in his response that divorce is not within God's purpose at all, and was only permitted as a concession to men's sin in their marriages. The Torah provisions for divorce protect the woman who might be humiliated and exploited by her husband. Jesus' response picks up on this protective intent and reads it as acknowledging

--not approving-- the existence of unjust husbands.

Jesus reaches for a more fundamental norm in marriage, drawn from both creation accounts about the nature of human dignity and community. He weaves together, from the Priestly account, the affirmation of the equal status of women and men ("Male and female he made them") and, from the Jahwist account, the idealized loyalty that would cause a man so to commit himself to his wife that he would leave everything for her ("A man leaves behind his father and mother."). The clinching statement for his position, on which he elaborates after quoting it, is "The two become one flesh."

Jesus' interpretation of divorce legislation, and his setting it against the creation accounts, makes these affirmations: 1) the woman's dignity is equal to the man's and he has no fundamental right to "dismiss" her; 2) the man in choosing to marry has abandoned other options for his life and is obliged to the woman; 3) in marriage, the man and the woman are no longer independent agents who act against each other; they are one flesh. It is not God, therefore, who permits husbands the right to divorce, but human failure which God acknowledged by letting Moses regulate divorce for the protection of wives.

The criteria for marriage inferred from this conversation are equality, permanency, exclusiveness (abandonment of other attachments), and fulfillment of sexuality in becoming "one flesh".

Other accounts of Jesus' speaking on marriage refer not to Creation but to Torah, specifically to the Ten Words. Divorce, exposed as a concession to human failure in Matthew 19 and Mark 10, is defined as leading to adultery when there is re-marriage. The same point is made in a different context (a discussion on fulfillment of Torah) in Matthew 5. In Matthew, an exception is made for *porneia*, presumably unchastity (adultery) on the part of the wife. Mark reports no exception, in keeping with the stark nature of Jesus' response to his questioners.

Jesus interprets divorce as a concession to sin, rather than a right divinely ordained. He does not overthrow the permission given by Moses, nor authorize his followers to reject sisters and brothers who have endured the pain of divorce. In his dealing with the Samaritan woman of John 4 ("You've had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband"), the woman seems free to make her own way into the future as one redeemed and commissioned to evangelize.

Finally, in Matthew 5 on the Torah, Jesus interprets the Word against adultery in connection with the one against coveting: "Everyone who is looking at a woman for the purpose of craving her already commits adultery with her in his heart." The Greek word *epithymesai* indicates a consuming desire that leaves room for nothing else. This is not the experience of noticing an attractive person. It is, as the wording has it, a sustained effort to become overwhelmed by a craving. The purpose is the experience within oneself rather than a relationship with the other. The fantasy is of possession rather than an honest relationship. The focus is not on the other person as a human being but on one's own feeling or fantasy.

Such coveting is adultery, because it violates commitment to the one-flesh union of a marriage. And it violates the equal dignity of human beings which Jesus upheld in his reading of the creation accounts, by making the woman into an object for the experience of the man. By inference, marriage requires equality, commitment, and exclusiveness; the one-flesh union does not allow for the agency of one partner at the expense of another.

3. The Jesus Tradition on Marriage in the Epistles

There are a few local admonitions in the Epistles (some of which seem to be later insertions) about the conduct of women in the Church which have been used to support a "natural law" on the subordination of women in marriage and society. I am concerned here only with teachings which claim their authority from the sayings of Jesus. Two sayings attributed to Jesus had a profound influence on later teaching: his use of the creation text about the one-flesh union, and his rejection of divorce as a right within God's purpose for human community.

In regard to divorce, Paul says (I Corinthians 7), "I proclaim this, not I, but rather, the Lord:" that the Christian husband or wife should not file for divorce. The context is that "the time is short" before the end of the present age; rather than fretting over arrangements, Christians should focus on their obligations in the community of faith and their proclamation of Christ. Those who are single, divorced, or widowed should not seek to marry; those who are married should not seek divorce though it might be more comfortable to find a believing spouse or no spouse at all. (Likewise, Jews shouldn't scramble to adopt Gentile customs or vice versa; slaves shouldn't pine away wishing for freedom --though if the opportunity arises they should seize it.) Paul hands on Jesus' interpretation of Torah, a rejection of divorce as an entitlement.

The influence of Jesus' teaching is found in the continuing appeal to the "one-flesh" tradition. Jesus interpreted the Genesis text as a requirement of faithfulness ("What God has yoked together, a person shall not separate.") In I Corinthians 6, Paul understands the union as referring specifically to sex, and uses it as a warning against *porneia*, understood in this context as prostitution. It is likely that cultic prostitutes are in mind here. The most abhorrent aspect Paul envisions is "joining the Body of Christ to a prostitute."

In I Corinthians 7, in the instruction on divorce, Paul's develops the one-flesh theme within marriage. Not only are the children of the believer included within the household of faith, but even the unbelieving spouse may be "saved" through union with the believer. In other words, to be joined as one flesh and members of one household is to create a spiritual union which may be redemptive even to unbelievers. The children are assumed to be "saved" in any case; the unbelieving spouse is the one for whom Paul hopes the marriage will be redemptive. On the other hand, in II Corinthians 6:14ff, the Christians are warned not to marry unbelievers. Though much is made of an appeal to purity ("Touch nothing unclean"), at least part of the reasoning is based in the one-flesh tradition: "What consent exists of the temple of God with idols?"

In Ephesians 5, under the general heading, "Be subject to one another," the one-flesh union is the source of an appeal to husbands to respect the dignity of, and to care wholly for, their wives. Without refuting the popular view of the day that the husband is the head of the wife, the Epistle redefines the meaning of being the head, so as to create what is in effect an equal partnership. This is in keeping with Jesus' appropriation of the tradition to raise the status of wives, and to emphasize the commitment to which the husband is obliged. That the one-flesh union is used as an analogy for understanding the "mystery" of Christ and the Church raises the significance of marriage, just as the use of bread and wine in the Eucharist should deepen the character of every occasion where we break bread and share a cup together. This is the point at which we can justify marriage as a sacrament of the Church: each marriage is to be a sign "of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world...(The Book of Common Prayer, "The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage," p. 429)."

Finally, there is a teaching on celibacy which we can trace from Gospel to Epistles. Matthew 5 hints that whatever member of the body might be involved in adultery were better destroyed, beginning with the eye. Matthew 19 answers the question concerning remaining single with an affirmation of celibacy for the kingdom of heaven --for those to whom it is given. Paul treats this subject in I Thessalonians 4 and I Corinthians 7, setting celibacy or chastity in marriage against *porneia* (prostitution or promiscuity) rather than *moicheia* (adultery). Celibacy is a good thing but not for all and it must be voluntary (I Cor. 7). Marriage is the course for those who "cannot abstain;" and there is no dishonor in this, provided the marriage is based on respect and is not violated by adultery (I Thes. 4). I Thes. reaches back to the prayer of Tobias and Sarah on their wedding night. It is repeated in I Peter 3, where the "science" and custom of the day, which insisted on the physical and spiritual inferiority of women, must give way to respect for the wife as equal to the husband. This respect in marriage is seen as essential to the reception of one's prayers by God; and looks back to the view of marriage --though arranged by the family, built on mutual esteem and respect-- expressed in the Book of Tobit.

Paul agrees with Jesus that celibacy for the Kingdom of God is a good thing, but that it is not possible for everyone and should be enjoined upon no one. Since not everyone can or should be celibate, Paul goes on to recommend that in order to preclude promiscuity or the resort to prostitutes, people should be allowed to marry. "But if one cannot abstain. let him marry. For it is better to marry than to be inflamed."

D. Are There Consistent Norms for All?

Having examined the relevant New Testament texts in light of their background and the issues faced by the communities of Jesus and the early Church, I propose the following criteria for understanding Christian marriage --apart from any other cultural norms which might define it differently across times and ethnic groups.

--**Permanence.** Faithfulness to the commitment of marriage is to be as enduring, in this life, as one's faithfulness to God. Christians are not entitled to break marriages which don't please them or are less than satisfying, or to create new ones in pursuit of some other goal. The faithfulness of the marriage bond is an end in itself. While divorce is

acknowledged as a human reality and in some respects a necessity, it should be recognized for what it is, a concession to human lack of faith.

--**Exclusiveness.** Jesus' interpretation of the Creation tradition emphasizes that we abandon other goals and relationships which undermine our commitment to the marriage. The commandment against adultery is upheld throughout Gospels and the Epistles.

--**Respect.** The teaching on divorce and the reference to Creation in the Gospels make the two partners equal in the marriage. While women are treated as more vulnerable throughout the New Testament (because socially, in fact, they were), this historical given is superseded by the requirement of equal dignity. To the extent that men enjoy superior status in society, they are to exercise even greater care to protect and enhance the worth of their wives. The husband is not entitled to view his wife as an object for his satisfaction.

--**Becoming "one flesh"** . Much of what has already been said is included in this concept: exclusiveness, permanence, faithfulness, mutual respect and equality. The motive of the one-flesh union is companionship, fulfillment, and joy.

--**A Workplace for Salvation.** The community of marriage becomes a sign and a means of grace. The one-flesh union is offered to God to be transformed into the reality of Christ's presence between and through the spouses. Not only do they work out their own salvation through faithfulness; they also become a sign to those about them. Their union is not for themselves alone but for strengthening of the Church and salvation in the world.

--**Prohibitions.** The negatives which accompany the affirmations above include:

- 1) No adultery;
- 2) No coveting another in a deliberate adulterous fantasy;
- 3) No promiscuity or resort to prostitutes (for the married or unmarried).
- 4) Given the anti-cultic sexual legislation of Torah, and the fertility religions known to Paul, people of faith must be on guard against the confusion of sexuality and spirituality.

5) Marriage is not a private agreement for the ends of the people who enter the contract. The re-interpretation of marriage as a sign of Christ and the Church requires that any marriage undertaken in the life of the Church be offered as a sacrifice, in hope of God's using the gift for the salvation of those who offer and of all who witness. *The criterion for this significance in Ephesians 5 and I Corinthians 7 is not the presence of two sexes, as if the Bible saw any eternal mystery in hetero-sexuality.* That view is characteristic of the fertility cults. Rather, it is "being subject to one another" in Christ, and the recognition that the two have become one, which make the one-flesh union symbolically significant.

6) And finally, though there is much ambiguity about the word *porneia*, and there are shades of gray between "intended," "betrothed," and "married" in most cultures including those of the Bible, some form of commitment on the order of marriage is the place within which the one-flesh union is to be realized. At least as St. Paul understood it,

believers within the Christian community should choose between celibacy and marriage.

The question must be addressed, whether there is room in the community of faith to apply the same criteria to gay people and to straight people. In the list of requirements and prohibitions, is there any reason to say that gay and lesbian people should not enter and abide by covenants in a one-flesh union (or choose celibacy as the alternative)?

The only obstacle is an insistence that the sexual orientation of the two parties entering the covenant of marriage is essential to its validity. This insistence confuses sexuality with spirituality, confuses the historical given of a changing human institution with divine purpose in creation, and denies the possibility that our received social conventions might change --even to forms unanticipated in the Bible (as the abolition of slavery and moving towards equality for women have changed them).

St. Paul said, if we want people to refrain from prostitution and promiscuity, then "let them marry." What is to hinder us from fulfilling this advice in relation to homosexuals in the Church?

VI. CAN THE CHURCH SURVIVE THIS CHANGE?

The Church, for all the protests of some, has never had a unanimous view of homosexuals. For some, the only hope for gay people is to repent of their sexual orientation as sinful in itself. And if God chooses not to "heal" them, their only choice is to be celibate the rest of their lives. Others believe that homosexuality is a tragic disorder leading to sinful behavior, which should be no more harshly judged than any of the sins common to most people. While this is a more compassionate stance, it does eliminate the possibility of a true covenant between two homosexuals: that would sanctify what has already been labelled as sinful.

Some recognize that the Bible does not condemn homosexuality, but nonetheless hold back from blessing a one-flesh covenant between two homosexual people. It might be that there is anxiety about biblical interpretation: Yes, it's reasonable to read these texts in a new light, but since there has never been 100% agreement in the Church on this issue, can we risk acting on what *might* be a wrong conclusion? Perhaps they fear for the institution: The loudest voices in the Church have been so stridently insistent of late to ban the possibility of holy homosexual relationships; even if we admit that these voices have been wrong, can the institution survive such a public change of position?

I believe that in order to proclaim "good news to the poor" as Jesus did, the Church must admit that homosexual people have been unjustly excluded from full participation in the Body of Christ. Publically coming clean (repentance) may seem like institutional death, but it is our best hope for new life in Christ. Otherwise we join those whom Jesus condemned for "laying heavy burdens upon people, without raising a finger to lift them." Changing our corporate stance on this matter may be as agonizing a struggle for the Church as repentance from racism will be in white America --but if we are seeking first

the Reign of God, we will find the grace we need!

A. Can We Risk Being Wrong Again?

I too have faced self-doubt in the process of committing my conclusions to the scrutiny of the faithful in various gatherings, and now to paper for others to read. What if I'm wrong?

1. Sin Boldly

A maxim attributed to Martin Luther comforts me. He was reflecting on the fact that we are all sinners, always falling short of the glory of God. Whatever we do, he observed, will be sin in some measure. Rather than do nothing, however, we must make the best choice we're capable of making, and "Sin boldly" --confident that the grace of God will redeem us, and will be just as available for those whose choices are affected by ours. To "sin boldly" is the only way I can preach or stand at the Altar or raise my children.

2. Choosing

Admitting that there are different interpretations, some more popular than others, I also admit that I have no undiluted access to truth; my experience and "knowledge" are just as affected as everyone else's by all kinds of interests and motives. Partly this is the result of sin; partly it's just the joyful diversity of human life, experience, and culture. In conflicting readings, therefore, I have to look at more than what seems self-evident from the texts to me. Two realities beyond the text have spoken most profoundly to me towards an inclusive reading.

The first reality is *the presence of the Spirit of Christ* in the many gay Christians with whose lives I've been blessed to connect. There are indisputable signs. "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the power of the Holy Spirit," said Paul. And we know what the results of that Spirit are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5: 22). This is not to say that gay Christians always lead more exemplary lives than straight ones. The deep wounds of sustained rejection are evident in some --wounds all too often inflicted by the Church. But I have rejoiced in gay couples whose faithfulness to one another is as godly as that of any legally married and Church- blessed couples I know. I have seen sacrificial giving for the building up of a Church which refuses to celebrate them. I have seen just and compassionate lives, witnessing to the presence of Christ in every place. If I must choose between different possible readings of the Bible, and there is a possibility that includes these people, how could I reject it?

The second and even greater reality is *Jesus himself*. We say in the Church that --as all of us stand under judgment for sin-- our only Mediator and Advocate is Jesus. I consider his life and the choices he made, the controversies in which he was found, the accusations which he sustained. When I imagine myself standing before an Eternal Judge with Jesus

as my Advocate: since I will be accused of something anyway, I'd rather be accused of letting unauthorized people into the Kingdom of God, than of barring the door to some who wanted in. Given a range of interpretations, I'll preach the reading which lets the most people in!

B. Can We Risk Admitting that We Were Wrong In the Past?

Some in the Church complain about "wasting our time" on this debate at all. It's as if whatever time were wasted was the fault of the people who are excluded, who dare to knock at the door. If the matter were trivial --say, whether to use blue or purple vestments during Advent-- I could understand the complaint. But considering the plea of a rejected class of people strikes me as part of the nature of the Gospel. How could listening to them and rethinking our position be a waste of time? The debate is created by those who bar the door, not by those who knock.

Similar debates are embedded in the experience of the Church, recorded in Scripture. It's not just the outcome or the occasions for these decisions which provide guidance. The issues debated back then are no longer our issues. They were decided. They are given to us as Scripture so that we can learn from the process of those debates, and from a path which connects them to us. We are expected to follow the same path through our own dilemmas, sinning boldly as our forebears did in pursuit of the implications of the Gospel. They show us a way of losing our present institutional life so as to gain life in Christ.

1. A Case Study: The Ethiopian Eunuch

Acts 8: 26-37 reports Philip's encounter with a man reading the Isaiah scroll in his chariot. Philip, instructed by "the angel of the Lord" to travel this road, and then by the Spirit to catch up to the man, initiates a conversation leading to the man's baptism. The man is described as an Ethiopian eunuch, and the text he reads is the Servant song of Isaiah 53.

These details give the story its conflict. The Ethiopian is a foreigner, of course, but that is not the greatest problem for his inclusion in the assembly of the Lord. In Leviticus 21 and even more clearly in Deuteronomy 23, the Torah refuses admittance into the assembly to a man "whose testicles are crushed or whose male member is cut off." That we are intended to understand the eunuch as a castrated man is made clear by the quotation of Isaiah 53, in which the servant is described not only as "cut off" but also as "crushed"-- using the same word that describes the eunuch in Deuteronomy.

There is great dramatic tension when the eunuch says to Philip, "Here is water; what hinders me from being baptized?" Philip might have responded, "You are a sexual anomaly whose inclusion in the household of faith is expressly prohibited by Torah." Of course, that was not his response. He chose, apparently, to consider Isaiah 56, where the foreigner and the eunuch are potentially welcome in the assembly of the Lord.

"And the eunuch may not say, 'See, I am a barren tree.'
For thus says the Lord, 'The eunuchs who keep my

sabbaths and choose by what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant: I will give to them in my house and within my walls a hand and a name, good rather than sons and daughters--a name of ages I will give them which shall not be cut off.

The verb *karath* is used here, "cut off" as also in the Deuteronomic description of the man who is barred from entering the assembly.

Acts 8 is a case study in holding one biblical text against another. Early readers of this account, trained in the Hebrew Scriptures, were sure to appreciate Philip's dilemma and to recognize that he models the choice of an inclusive text over one that excludes. *Life in Christ, and the command of the Holy Spirit, require us to set aside the reading which would bar anyone who seeks to enter into the baptismal covenant from full participation in the community of Jesus.* The text Philip chooses to interpret as superceding the purity law for the Ethiopian eunuch concludes with this sweeping summary:

"Oracle of the Lord GOD: Gathering the banished of Israel, I will yet gather to them all who are to be gathered."

Acts reinterprets "Israel" as the Church; Philip acts on the command to gather any who seek to come in. The lesson for the Church is not that we should seek only Ethiopian eunuchs to baptize and include in our community, but that *all who have been outcast -- especially those excluded only by our reading of scripture-- must be welcomed.* Apparently Philip did not think he was rejecting Scripture. Rather, he decided that the Christ who was "crushed" and "cut off" authorized him to set aside the purity code in favor of the prophetic promise to the outcast.

2. A Case Study: Cornelius, Peter, and Unclean Foods

The kosher food laws caused far more consternation to be recorded in the New Testament than did the prohibition of mutilated men, no doubt because many more verses are given in Torah to the former than to the latter. And many more "unclean" pagans were streaming to the Christian community than God-fearing eunuchs. The controversy over food appears in Matthew 15: 10-20 and Mark 7: 14-23; Galatians 6: 12-17, Romans 14: 1-12, I Corinthians 10: 14-22.

According to Acts 11: 1-18, Peter was led to the house of the Roman officer Cornelius through a vision in which he was instructed by the Lord to "kill and eat" animals which had been declared unclean in the holy Scriptures. After two protests, he was instructed again, "What God has made clean, you must not call unclean." By this Peter came to believe that unclean peoples must be permitted into the Church as they were, when others were requiring them to go through the rites of purification, to become and live as Jewish converts.

The outcome of Peter's and Philip's experiences, among others, was the "Jerusalem Council" described in Acts 15, at which the apostles struggled for a common ethic in a

new era: still maintaining the value of scriptures, recognizing the authority of Christ manifest in the new work among them by the Holy Spirit, and becoming radically more inclusive than their old interpretations would have allowed. The process at work in these accounts is the choice of a more inclusive reading, where people once excluded seek to follow Jesus and to enter his community, and manifest the presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The outcome of the debate over foods was not sealed within the New Testament writings. The Jerusalem declaration in Acts 15: 19-29 requires Gentile Christians to avoid idols, *porneia*, strangled meat and blood. (In context, it is clear that all of these are associated with pagan worship.) That the decree was not interpreted alike by all is obvious in Galatians 2, in Paul's conflict with Peter. As Paul recalls, the elders in Jerusalem asked for no restrictions at all, except that the converts "remember the poor." Nonetheless, Paul reflects Acts 15 in the discussions of meat, idols, and *porneia* in I Corinthians.

Some Jewish Christians observed that Gentiles could be purified and convert to Judaism if they were serious about serving God. Some Christians apparently held to a two-class system for Jews and Gentiles; presumably, Gentiles could be baptized, but they would not be recognized as leaders and teachers in the Church. Others wished to enforce different rules on the basis of this difference in identity.

Similarly, some contemporary heterosexual Christians believe that homosexuals could "convert" if they wanted to, and become heterosexual so as to enter the Church. Or --if their identity cannot be changed-- it is held that, while homosexuals may be baptized and confirmed, they must not be married or ordained in the Church. Or it is held that gay and lesbian Christians are acceptable only if they are celibate, not having the choice between celibacy and marriage allowed to heterosexuals.

Even the debate over clean and unclean food was not fully resolved within the writings of the New Testament. The Church had to continue to work with this issue --and with the full inclusion of Gentiles, and with its relationship to Judaism-- for years, decades, even centuries and millenia after the New Testament was canonized. The Church is still working out our relation to Judaism; we have inflicted some horrible atrocities, and most of these have come from (or at least been justified by) strict adherence to scriptures which could be interpreted then or now, whenever we choose, to the condemnation of others.

I believe that, interesting as they may be historically, the particular issues debated by early Jewish Christians are not the burden of the New Testament's message for Christians today. Rather, it is the process of comparing Scriptures and choosing an interpretation which welcomes those who have been outcasts. Can the Church survive such a process today? I think our survival requires it. We have been at our best in history when we welcomed the outcasts. We have been at our worst when we wielded Scripture to justify our cultural conventions and discriminations.

Can the Church admit that it has been wrong to exclude homosexual men and women in the Body of Christ? Can we survive the embarrassment of repentance? Justice will not

31 What does the Bible say about being Gay? (Tract) PMJackson+

allow us to be concerned with institutional self-preservation. We can take comfort that changing our minds on biblical interpretation, to welcome those who were shunned, is written into the charter of our common life. We can acknowledge that the Church has had to turn from sins of exclusion and persecution in the past; and that what hurt us most was defending our old views before we finally repented of them. And we can follow the examples of Philip, Peter, and Paul, who set aside old interpretations for new understandings that allowed the Holy Spirit to add to the Church "those who were being saved" --whoever they may have been.